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ABSTRACT

Law-related education (LRE) has been shown to produce positive changes in student attitudes toward school, parents, the police, and deviant behavior. Project NEXUS, a rural Appalachian program designed to address dropout prevention and predelinquent factors, was implemented in Ellijay (Georgia) Middle School. A group of 25 students, chosen because of discipline referrals or other at-risk factors, were invited to join the program; 15-18 attended weekly meetings throughout the first year. Community law-related resource persons were speakers at the meetings, which focused on respect for the law, concepts of law, citizen rights, and court procedures. The program also featured enrichment through field trips to the Atlanta zoo, an orchestra performance, an art museum, and juvenile hearings in a teen court. Two trips were also made to the local courthouse for orientation and trial observation. In the spring, NEXUS hosted Law Week activities. Teachers of NEXUS students reported improvement in classroom participation, cooperation with teacher, adjustment to the classroom environment, and attendance. Virtually all students made positive comments about the program. Characteristics of effective LRE programs such as NEXUS include teaching strategies that foster student interaction, careful selection of case materials, in-depth instruction, use of outside resource persons, peer support for teachers, and active involvement of building administrators. LRE resources are listed. (SV)

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Using Law-Related Education as a Lifeline for Rural At-Risk Students

Teaching about the law is by no means a novel idea. The traditional rote memorization of legal facts, however, has given way to the more relevant approach of law-related education (LRE). LRE can be defined as

> education to give people an adequate base of knowledge, understanding, and training about the law, the legal process, and the legal system that, as part of their general education, enables them to be more informed and effective citizens. (Study Group on Law-Related Education, 1978, p. 13).

LRE was conceived by Isidore Starr as a chance occurrence in the 1930s. At that time Starr taught social studies at a high school in the day time to finance his tuition to evening law school. He included some of the concepts he was studying at night, such as constitutional law, criminal law, torts and contracts, in his day-time social studies classes. He professed amazement on the effect of law-related discussions on the interest and quality of student thinking (Starr, 1977).

After being admitted to the Bar, Starr remained an educator committed to the law studies movement. Over a twelve-year period he wrote a series of articles encouraging teachers to use case studies dealing with controversial public issues. Finally in 1962 the National Council for Social Studies (of which Starr was serving as vice-president) joined forces with the Civil Liberties Educational Foundation to develop a program for improving the teaching of the Bill of Rights in the Schools. Also in 1962, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan addressed the annual meeting of the National Council for Social Studies on teaching the Bill of Rights. Brennan encouraged the study of landmark judicial rulings to transform the current rote memorization instruction in civil liberties. Thus, by the end of 1962, interest in Law-Related Education (LRE) was spreading nation-wide (Starr, 1977).

In discussing the motivation of individuals to give early support to the LRE movement. Starr (1977) identified the following factors of law (or case) study instruction:

(1) was needed to give meaning and relevance to the study of the Constitution and Bill of Rights;
(2) was a means of assisting students in coping with law-related problems;
(3) would lead to an understanding of the nature of law in our society;
(4) would help in the development of analytical skills in confronting value conflicts;
(5) would assist in probing moral and ethical dilemmas; and

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(6) would help develop an appreciation for legal process and for the bases of law.

Today, theorists in the discipline of social studies have identified four reasons for including LRE in the curriculum. These points are as follows: (a) development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for citizenship; (b) growth of student interest in social studies; (c) provision of breath and depth to education in social studies; and (d) prevention of delinquency (Pereira, 1988).

LRE effectiveness with youth at-risk with the law

In 1979 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice became interested in the possibilities of LRE. Over the next five years five nationally known organizations were funded to develop and demonstrate effective methods of implementing and institutionalizing law-related education in elementary and secondary schools. In conjunction with these projects, research was conducted to determine how the implementation of LRE principles might affect antecedent factors and conditions that juvenile delinquency research shows are associated with delinquent behavior.

Hunter (1987) reported on a study involving 1600 LRE students and 900 comparison students representing 61 LRE classes and 44 comparison classes in 32 schools in California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, and North Carolina. Students were administered pre- and post-tests in which a set of self-reported items to measure changes in delinquent behavior that could be attributed to students' participation in LRE classes were included.

Results indicate that there were significant differences between the LRE and control groups on the following:

--favorable interactions with parents
--favorable ratings by student of teacher and class
--perception that something worthwhile results from maintaining good standing in a legitimate role
--strong attachment to other persons in the youth's environment
--positive attitude toward police and judges
--decreased rationalizations of deviance and violence
--heightened perception of fairness
--more positive peer relationships
--decrease (self-reported) in school infractions and violence
--decrease in alcohol and drug use

Although significant differences were found between the two groups in high school, junior high school and elementary school classes, the greatest effect was at the junior high school level.

Accongio and Vaughan (1987) reported a study of over 400 students at a high school in Rochester, NY. Law Magnet School students formed the experimental group, while selected classes in the comprehensive program at the high school were used as controls. Both groups were administered pre- and post-tests. Results indicated that Law Magnet students made a statistically significant movement toward believing they could exercise control over their own lives in this society and can effect changes.

Johnson (1984) reported on a study at a junior high school in Colorado. Evaluators obtained matched pre- and post-test data from 229 LRE students and 43 control subjects. Significant results indicated the LRE students reporting:

--perceiving opportunities for demonstrating competence to teachers
--really liking some teachers and believing they care about you as a person
--teachers offering support to build your interest and help you
--timely completion of assignments and coming to class prepared to participate
--reduced clockwatching in this class
--favorable attitudes toward the police
--favorable attitudes toward personal violence
--decreased rationalizations that delinquent behavior is sometimes acceptable
--belief that you are treated fairly in school with respect to rules, grades
--perception that the rules in this class are applied the same to everybody
--students in this class are willing to help one another with questions, course work
--when other students speak in this class, they have something worthwhile to say
--other students in this class pay attention when you are talking
--decrease in school rule infractions
--decrease in drinking alcohol
--decrease in going out with a group planning to fight or break the law
--perception that the teacher in this class grades fairly

The commonalities in results of the research reported above is striking. It appears that effective LRE programs do, indeed, bring about changes in attitude on many factors which represent pre-delinquent behavior.

Project NEXUS

Project NEXUS is an example of a LRE program designed to address both dropout prevention and other pre-delinquent factors identified in LRE research--specifically for a rural mountainous region. The program, funded for 1989-90 by the Maehling Fellowship Fund from

the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, was implemented in Ellijay Middle School in the North Georgia Appalachian town of Ellijay.

Ellijay is remote from any large urban area and devoid of cultural resources such as museums, zoos, live theater, and outside activities beyond those provided by the school. The major industries of the area are apple orchards, broiler chickens, and some light industry. Many workers travel some distance to the carpet mills of Dalton for blue-collar, minimum wage jobs. The population of the county is approximately 10,000, with Ellijay being its only major town. There is a high unemployment rate because of the seasonal nature of these industries, and this impacts upon the schools. Some 33% of the population live in mobile type housing. The area has above average Georgia rates for teen-age pregnancies and unemployment, and ranks first in high school dropouts at 33.05% for 16 to 19 year olds.

Project implementation A group of approximately 25 students were originally chosen who had one or more of the following characteristics: high number of discipline referrals, frequent absenteeism, family instability, and economic and emotional needs. Students were invited to join; those who were not interested were not encouraged to stay. An average of 15-18 students remained with the project through the first year, attending weekly meetings during the regular activity period scheduled on Friday afternoon.

Many community law-related resource persons were used as speakers for the weekly meetings, such as: local judges (probate, magistrate, city recorder's court, superior court), the sheriff, state prison personnel, a prisoner from a local prison camp, local attorneys, and court personnel. The focus of the meetings was heavily geared toward respect for the law, concepts of law, citizen rights, and court procedures.

It was intended that students get to know their local law-related personnel and be able to communicate with them in a relaxed manner, in order to develop respect for the individuals and concern for the functions that these key people play in the local community. There was no testing of knowledge, but students were encouraged to ask any questions they had of their special guests.

An important second goal of the program was the emphasis on enrichment through field trips. A survey was taken at the beginning of the year to determine student interest--the Atlanta Zoo came out on top. Saturday field trips were taken to the zoo, with a picnic lunch in Grant Park, and a trip to nearby Cyclorama (a historic circular painting of the Civil War). Another Saturday field trip took them to an Atlanta Symphony's special children's program--with front row seats, a visit to the High Museum of Art, and lunch at The Varsity--a favorite Georgia Tech student hangout. On the more serious side, another Saturday field trip was to see actual juvenile hearings at the metropolitan area Teen Court in Cobb County.

Two other trips were made during the year. The first was an orientation tour to the local courthouse. The Clerk of Courts enabled students to see what functions of government were conducted there. A local attorney met the students in an empty court room and led them through the steps in a criminal trial. The second courthouse trip was to visit a live trial in the Superior Court, a case in substance possession and abuse which ended in a guilty verdict. After the trial, the defense attorney was invited to the classroom to discuss the trial with the students.

An important part of forming group cohesion was the wearing of the NEXUS t-shirt, which was awarded after the student had attended a minimum number of meetings. One student who had been suspended from school by the time the t-shirts had arrived, was still interested in getting his shirt and wearing it.

In the spring of the year, NEXUS hosted the Law Week activities, promoted by the American Bar Association (ABA), the state and local bar, as well as the Georgia Law-Related Education Consortium. Activities included poster contests held throughout the school using the ABA theme "Generations of Justice".

An awards breakfast was held and many members of the local law community attended, including one of the two Superior Court judges who had previously spoken at a school-wide assembly hosted by the NEXUS students. Awards were given for the "Outstanding NEXUS Student" and to others who had helped with the program. Small plaques engraved with individual student names were given to each NEXUS member. Local school dignitaries also participated in the program.

The program was continued for a second year--during the 1990-91 school year. Program meeting time was changed from the very hectic Friday afternoon club time to a twice monthly slot during physical education or exploratory class time. Now an understanding was reached with the administration that students were to be released from in-school suspension to attend meetings. (In the previous year club time was taken away from students who had received too many infractions of the rules and proved to be an impediment to getting the students to NEXUS meetings.)

The very adequate Maehling Fellowship funding was not available for the second year. In its place the Appalachian Mountain Circuit Bar Association assessed all its members a special "fee" for the NEXUS Program. This was nowhere near the amount needed to duplicate the previous year's program, but did provide support for the 1991 Law Week activities again in the spring. A local civic club assisted with providing T-shirts for the new group and with an awards breakfast. Field trips were limited to the local courthouse. In spite of the limitations, students appeared to enjoy the second year too.

Evaluation The most useful measurement tool was a teacher attitude assessment which was completed by classroom teachers of each NEXUS student. Teachers noted much advancement in

the following areas: classroom participation, cooperation with teacher, and better adjustment to classroom environment. Some increase was noted also in students being tardy to class less often, in student attendance and in decreased disruption in class. No improvement was noted in overall student grades nor in coming to class well-prepared.

Another measurement was done by simply interviewing each student about the NEXUS experience and whether the student would like to be a member for another year if given the opportunity. All but one student stated that they would like to join another year if given the opportunity. All students verbalized some positive experience from the activity.

Using school attendance records as a measurement was unsuccessful, however. The school had an epidemic of measles during the 1989-90 school year, which distorted the figures.

Members of the legal community, the media, and school personnel made many positive comments about the program and offered support. Nearly every invitee came to the breakfasts; many more school personnel wanted to be invited the second year. The Project received a Special Commendation for 1990 in the Oldsmobile Division--Learning Magazine Awards. The Project sponsor was named runner-up for the Middle School Division for National Law Auxiliary Awards for 1991. The Project has become an on-going program recommended by the Georgia Law-Related Education Consortium.

Components of an effective program

Effective LRE programs, such as Project NEXUS, go far beyond the civics course which teaches facts. To achieve the four basic goals of an LRE curriculum [(a) development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for citizenship; (b) growth of student interest in social studies; (c) provision of breadth and depth to education in the social studies; and (d) prevention of delinquency], however, necessitates the inclusion of the five common characteristics of LRE programs which have been proven effective. These are:

(1) use of teaching strategies that foster true interaction and joint work among students,

(2) judicious selection and presentation of illustrative case materials,

(3) provision of a sufficient quantity of instruction,

(4) adequate preparation and use of outside resource persons,

(5) professional peer support for teachers, and

(5) active involvement of building administrators (Little, 1982).

Merely having students sit together filling out individual work sheets does not represent true interaction. Instead, activities must be structured to develop the kind of interaction and interdependence among students that results in positive attitude changes. In order to accomplish

this, students must first develop skills to deal with the controversy and conflict that inevitably arise when groups work together. Then, group exercises must be structured along the guidelines specified by the theorists in cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson,1984; Slavin, 1991). Finally, teachers must be committed to foster student to student interaction, instead of having teacher-dominated or teacher and high-achieving students-dominated lessons.

When selecting case materials, teachers need to exercise caution. Cases should not consistently depict the legal system as flawless, nor should they be excessively negative. The goal must be to strike a balance between respect for the law and healthy skepticism about its application.

Sufficient time must be devoted to LRE lessons to treat complex issues. Teachers need to clearly organize and sequence instruction, integrate new ideas with practical applications, and provide checks on understanding and mastery. It is recommended that programs of study be at least a semester in length (Little & Haley, 1982).

The use of outside resource persons is crucial to an effective LRE program. By virtue of their real world involvement and credibility, outsiders have the ability to influence students' views of and attitudes toward the law. These persons can also be used as adult role models. When inviting these individuals to the classroom, however, it is imperative to prepare them as to the level of understanding of the students, as well as the specific subject matter to be discussed.

Peer support is necessary to facilitate teachers in their implementation of new programs. If several teachers began LRE programs at the same time, they could discuss with each other "how it was going", observe practices in action, and have the opportunity for shared planning.

Finally, successful LRE programs had active support of building administrators. Such administrators would provide opportunities for peer support, reinforce teachers in their LRE attempts, and defend experimenting teachers against sources of strain.

It is imperative that the above five points be incorporated in every LRE program. Research has identified such points as common to effective programs. LRE programs which just "teach about the law" in the traditional way are useful only for imparting facts--not affecting attitudes.

LRE resources

It is not necessary to create all one's ideas and materials for a LRE program--many such resources currently exist. Helpful resources include:

American Bar Association. *Update on LRE.* 750 North Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, IL 60611.

Carl Vinson Institute of Government. *LRE Circuit.* University of Georgia, 201 N. Milledge Ave., Athens, GA 30602.

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Lipman, M. (1981). *You are the Judge!* (Book One & Book Two). Naples, FL: Ann Arbor.

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Ohio State Bar Association (1983). *Gold E. Locks* (video). Columbus, OH: author.

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